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AIR FORCE TO TEST A WEAPON IN SPACE

Missile Is to Be Fired at Star, Avoiding Ban by Congress on Man-Made Targets

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Feb. 19 — Air Force officials have devised a plan to continue testing an antisatellite weapon that they believe does not violate a Congressional prohibition against testing the weapon on objects in space, Pentagon officials and Congressional experts say.

The plan, which has yet to be approved by Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger, calls for carrying out at least two tests in which a missile fired by an F-15 jet would seek to guide itself toward the heat generated by a star.

A Pentagon official said Tuesday that the tests would be particularly helpful in developing the capacity to attack satellites that fly in low orbit. These could include Soviet photographic reconnaissance satellites and ocean reconnaissance satellites.

Last year Congress voted to ban all tests of the Air Force antisatellite weapon against objects in space as long as the Soviet Union continued with its current moratorium on tests of its antisatellite system, which would be launched into space by an SS-9 rocket.

Congressman Expresses Concern

Officials in the Defense Department said the tests planned for the current fiscal year would not violate this restriction because the antisatellite missile would be directed at the infrared energy, or heat, emitted from a star and not at a man-made object in space.

They said the Air Force had established a legal precedent for this interpretation by carrying out the same type of test last year in the face of a different Congressional measure that applied to tests against objects in space.

Representative Norman D. Dicks, a Washington Democrat who played a role in drafting the Congressional restriction, expressed concern over the Air Force plans and said he was seeking further details before the test procedures were approved.

"I am a little worried that it looks as if they are trying to find an avenue to skirt the intention of the amendment,

though they may be in technical compliance," Mr. Dicks said.

The Air Force antisatellite system uses an F-15 plane to fire a missile equipped with a heat-seeking sensor. The missile carries no explosives; it destroys the target by crashing into it.

A Pentagon expert said test plans developed before the Congressional action called for conducting one test in the current fiscal year in which the antisatellite missile would seek to home in on the heat generated by a star.

Balloon-Like Target Planned

Other tests would also have been carried out in which the missile would have been directed at balloon-like targets, according to the earlier plans.

After the Congressional action, Air Force officials who oversee the development of the antisatellite system decided to "restructure" the program. They have since proposed that at least two and perhaps three tests be conducted in the current fiscal year in which the antisatellite missile would be directed at the heat of a star, the Pentagon official said.

The official said that such tests were technically important because they would allow the Air Force to assess the performance of the weapon at low altitudes, where the heat generated by the earth's atmosphere could affect the performance of the missile's heat-seeking sensor.

He said the balloon-like targets developed for the antisatellite program were of limited utility in such low-altitude tests because they did not hover for a long time at those altitudes.

However, the official said the antisatellite program would probably be adversely affected if the Congressionally imposed ban on testing against objects in space was not reversed for the fiscal year 1987. If the restriction is maintained for that year, he said, "you begin to run out of useful tests to do."

'Batting Practice Without a Ball'

Some Congressional critics of the Air Force program have questioned the scientific utility of tests that do not involve the use of targets.

Representative Les AuCoin, Democrat of Oregon, said in a letter written Feb. 10 to Gen. Charles A. Gabriel, the Air Force Chief of Staff, "Testing against a point in space is like doing batting practice without a ball."

In a similar letter to Secretary Weinberger, Mr. AuCoin suggested that the purpose of such tests might be to provoke the Soviet Union to abandon its moratorium on antisatellite tests.

Despite the Congressional restriction, the Air Force has requested \$30 million in procurement funds and \$278 million in research funds for the antisatellite weapon program in the fiscal year 1987.

In a Pentagon report released Tuesday, Donald A. Hicks, Under Secretary of Defense for research and engineering, said the Pentagon would seek "corrective action" to "promptly restore our ability to conduct" tests against targets.

Mr. Hicks said that if such action was not taken the Pentagon would lose \$20 million that was spent on two targets sent into orbit last December, shortly before the Congressional prohibition on testing against targets was enacted. Critics of the antisatellite program contend that the Pentagon placed those targets into orbit to put pressure on Congress not to agree to a test ban.